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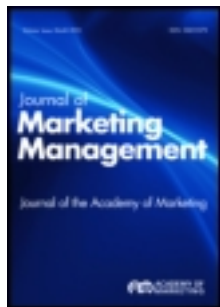
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**Miriam Catterall¹,
Pauline Maclaran
and Lorna Stevens** **Postmodern Paralysis:
The Critical Impasse in Feminist
Perspectives on Consumers**

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Critical perspectives on theory play an important and valued role in disciplines across the academy. Feminist perspectives might be expected to be at or near the forefront of critical engagement with consumer behaviour theory, especially given the importance of gender in consumer research. Following a brief upsurge during the 1990s, critical feminist voices have been muted of late. This paper explores some reasons for this. It begins with a brief overview of research on gender and consumer behaviour and how insights from feminist theories and feminist activism began to alter our understanding of gendered consumption. It then discusses how postmodern and postfeminist perspectives have diluted feminism as a critique of gendered consumption. Finally, it argues that a return to materialist feminism would open up possibilities for new and more critical analyses of gendered consumption.

Introduction

Consumer culture has become 'central, majestic, and dominant' in our time (McRobbie 1994, p.33). It also has particular significance for women, as it privileges the (female) consumer over the (masculine) producer (Nava 1991). Within a postmodern framework, consumer culture has been proffered as an arena of female participation and enjoyment where women can pick and choose from a range of multiple subjectivities (McRobbie 1994; Radner 1995; Fenton 2000; Hollows 2000). Covering both work and leisure, such subjectivities have promised a freedom of self-expression that liberates women from the constraints of (male) modernist constructions of the female subject. This so called 'return to pleasure' reclaims the body and the 'feminine' principle in consumption (Shildrich 1997), a privileging that has implications for how women and 'femininity' are perceived (McRobbie 1994; Shiach 1998). Indeed some commentators suggest that postmodernism goes

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hand in hand with feminism in its validation of 'ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity' (Ang and Hermes 1997, p.342).

Concomitantly, a postfeminist discourse assures us that feminism is no longer necessary, that women can indeed 'have it all', and that there are now numerous opportunities for females to achieve positions of power without a perceived loss of their femininity (McDonald 2000). Alongside this postfeminist discourse there has been a shift away from activist feminist movements that seek to bring about political change (and adopt an implicitly anti-capitalist, anti-market stance) to a 'market feminism' (Scott 2000), which sees industrialisation and the market system as making a large contribution to the growth of feminism. Popularised feminist ideas appear as product images (Cole and Hribar 1995) with advertisers repackaging 'feminist quests for freedom, choice and opportunity as images, desires, lifestyles, and emotions that can be attained through consumption' (McDonald 2000, p.38).

In consumer research Firat and Venkatesh (1995) have reinforced this perspective with the notion of 'liberatory postmodernism' which posits a consumer who, rather than being seduced blindly by the market, can find multifaceted ways for self-expression, including ways to register rebellion through consumption. From this postmodern perspective consumption is elevated from its secondary status in modernism to be reinstated as an equal with production. In a postmodern world consumers are seen as producers of symbolic meanings that attach to goods and services. The emphasis is on the creative and imaginative consumer, as he or she appropriates marketplace signs and symbols for his or her own ends. Yet, such a position also helps to reinforce a consumerist ideology of achieving a personal freedom through economic means. As Sontag somewhat wryly observes, 'the freedom to consume has come to be equated with freedom itself' (in McRobbie 1994, p.33). According to Shiach (1998), such an emphasis ghettoises feminist critique of cultural practices and makes it impossible for feminists to develop a sustained critique of dominant paradigms.

In what we have termed as a 'postmodern paralysis', we suggest that the ideal of liberated womanhood, playfully created through the market and playing creatively in that market, acts to quell any activist notions, any thoughts of subversion from outside the market. After all, if the market is now perceived as a site for rebellion what is the point in trying to act from outside it? Indeed, in Western society is there any possibility of doing this (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson 2004)? We argue that this focus on consumption has often been at the expense of more critical analyses that explore the important interrelationships between production, reproduction and consumption, and their associated gender implications. Similarly, in relation to women, the perceived 'liberation' achievable through the marketplace is mainly accessible by Western, white, heterosexual, able-

bodied, middle class women (Lafrance 1998). It ignores the many groups that are marginalised from the market, just as it ignores the gender issues surrounding those women who are a part of the market's production process (for example, sweatshop workers and low paid service workers).

Through this article we wish to draw attention to the complexity of issues that surround the postmodern paralysis in theorising from a more critical feminist perspective. In particular, we wish to consider the implications for the field of gender, marketing and consumer research. In order to contextualise this discussion, we consider the ways that research on gender and consumption has evolved from the early 1970s to date, identifying a critical impasse that now seems to prevail in this postmodern, postfeminist era. Finally we suggest ways in which to move beyond this impasse and how feminist perspectives may open up new possibilities for critique together with new avenues for research in consumer behaviour.

Early Perspectives on Gender and Consumer Research

Almost from its inception, modern marketing has relied on gender to help understand and explain consumers and their behaviour. Indeed for decades marketers took it for granted that consumers were female, the *she* of most early marketing and consumer behaviour texts (Frederick 1929). However, in spite of its salience, gender is not always well understood or conceptualised in marketing theory, research or practice.

From the 1970s consumer researchers have focused primarily on two gender-related topics, namely gender portrayals in advertising and how gender identity could be used to understand and predict consumer behaviour. Most of the advertising studies examine how women are portrayed and whether or not these portrayals have altered in line with the changing role of women in society. Disappointingly, however, Kacen and Nelson (2002) found little change in the ways that women have been represented over the decades. Similarly, the other main area, gender identity, or the extent to which a person identifies with masculine or feminine personality traits, has also proved disappointing, often with inconclusive results across a wide range of product studies (see Palan 2001).

Whilst interest in these two topics continues unabated, some researchers took a more critical view of this research, arguing that it has consistently failed to examine the complexity of the relationship between gender and consumer behaviour. Artz and Venkatesh (1991, p.619) observed that studies of gender issues in marketing and advertising generated 'superficial and self-evident inferences', were devoid of theory and were preoccupied with the single issue of sex-stereotyping. During the 1980s research on gender and consumer behaviour began to change. This coincided with the new

theoretical and methodological perspectives that began to emerge in consumer research as anthropologists, sociologists and literary critics joined marketing departments (Belk 1995). These examined wider consumption issues such as the meanings that consumers attach to products and how products are consumed, including the ways that they are used to create and sustain identity and self-concept. This 'new' consumer research has recently been termed Consumer Culture Theory by Arnould and Thompson (2005).

This paradigm shift in consumer behaviour research brought to the fore perspectives that mirrored the development of feminist theories on gender and research methodologies in other disciplines. Whilst the term gender has no single and universally agreed meaning, most consumer researchers in the Consumer Culture Theory tradition accept that sex refers to the biology of a person, whether a person is a woman or a man. Gender, by contrast, is a socio-cultural category referring to the ways that men and women are socialised into male and female roles.

Feminist methodologies stress parity between researcher and informant, and researcher involvement in the research process to minimise 'otherness' (Madriz 2000). They privilege consumers (readers) rather than producers and products (authors and texts), and emphasise the importance of context and the 'lived experience' of informants rather than 'expert' interpretations of consumer experience (Rinehart 1998; Andrews and Talbot 2000). Above all, feminist research, to a greater (modernist) or lesser (postmodernist) extent, addresses social change and political equality. We now turn to its application consumer research.

Feminist Perspectives in Consumer Research

Among the first papers in the consumer research literature to draw on these feminist perspectives were Stern (1992), Bristor and Fischer (1993), Hirschman (1993), Fischer and Bristor (1994), Joy and Venkatesh (1994) and Peñaloza (1994). These authors showed how theory and knowledge in marketing and consumer research was gendered in unarticulated, unrecognised ways. Stern (1992) applied feminist literary theory to the interpretation of advertisements. Fischer and Bristor (1994) deconstructed the rhetoric of marketing relationships. They argued that the discourse associated with the marketer/consumer relationship reveals parallels to that between male and female with notions of seduction and patriarchy woven into the relationship. In a similar vein, Hirschman (1993) examined the ideology articulated in articles published in the 1980 and 1990 volumes of the *Journal of Consumer Research*. She concluded that the dominant ideology is masculinist and that a key theme in both volumes is the use of the machine metaphor to characterise the behaviour of human beings. Joy and Venkatesh

(1994) introduced a postmodern feminist perspective to deconstruct how the pervasiveness of the machine metaphor in consumer research privileged the mind and cognitive activity (assumed male) over the body and emotions (assumed female). Drawing on the literature on feminist epistemology and research approaches, Peñaloza (1994) recommended the use of participatory and dialogic research methods to achieve a greater understanding of the consumer and thus move away from traditional machine-like information processing models of the consumer. Many other studies also contributed to our knowledge of the gendered nature of marketing and consumer behaviour (Venkatesh 1993; Ozanne and Stern 1993; Dobscha 1993; Costa 1994; Woodruffe 1996; Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 2000).

In contrast to the flurry of feminist perspectives on consumer research during the 1990s, recent work has been thin on the ground, both in terms of journal publications and conference proceedings, apart from a few exceptions (Stevens, Maclaran and Brown 2003; Stern and Russell 2004; Houston 2004). Furthermore, although Friend and Thompson (2000) demonstrated how one method, feminist memory work, could result in transforming the ways that women viewed and understood their experiences and attitudes in a shopping context, few studies have had an explicit transformatory agenda, an agenda that is at the heart of feminist research. In the section that follows we explore some of the reasons why we think this may be the case.

Postmodernism, Postfeminism and the Critical Impasse

In embracing pluralism and multiculturalism, postmodern thinking led to a recognition of the diversity of approaches required to study consumer culture (Scott 1992). It challenged elitist assumptions and heavily critiqued traditional hierarchical orders, high culture, absolute truths, and the many binary oppositions inherent in language (i.e. male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion, production/reproduction, culture/nature). Thus, postmodernists argue that gender is also one of those universalising and unhelpful dichotomies that typify modern Western thought. More specifically, gender categories are blurring and the boundaries between what is meant by masculinity and femininity are so indistinct that dividing people on the basis of gender identity is simply unproductive (Firat 1994). In a postmodern world of endless possibilities and multiple personas, gender becomes another ludic element, indeed it becomes multi-faceted, fluid and mutable, and ultimately an aspect of identity that can be altered at will.

Around this time the term postfeminism crept into usage. Postfeminism is not simply 'postmodern feminism', though it has certainly been influenced by it, nor does it mean the absence of feminism. However it represented a significant shift from the activist feminist movements of the 1970s (often

referred to as second-wave feminism) to what has sometimes been described as lucid or celebratory feminism. This postfeminism contrasted sharply with feminist critiques of consumption during the 1960s and 1970s which had focused on how marketers manipulated the female consumer through advertising images that stereotyped women and contributed to unequal power relationships. Feminist activists were basically anti-marketing and anti-consumerism, promoting a natural, authentic self that could be realised through various styles that were both anti-fashion and anti-capitalist (Cole and Hribar 2000). This critical approach to the marketplace persisted into the 1990s, notably with Wolf's (1991) critique of the beauty myth in consumer culture that created 'an itching, parching, product lust' in women.

Such was the success of early feminist campaigns that advertisers in the 1980s sought to redress the widening gulf between the world-view of a predominantly masculine profession and the consumer expectations of the majority of women (Mort 1996). They did so by incorporating feminist ideas into their messages. In conjunction with this, advertisers began to forsake more traditional methods of segmentation, such as age and gender, and to promote instead idealised lifestyle images which promised the good life to a society that was becoming increasingly reliant on consumer culture. The VALS (values and lifestyles) system that has been a favourite amongst marketers for decades, is a particularly good example of this lifestyle segmentation.

The postfeminist imaginary is very much characterised by the reconciliation of feminism and consumption with the remaking of feminism into desires and identities that can be realised through consumption. The Nike culture that began to target women in the late 1980s epitomises this postfeminist celebratory position. In its appeals to a more authentic self that can be realised through exercise, Nike's 'Just do it' campaigns that specifically targeted women are accorded with upholding feminist values and playing a pivotal role in encouraging women to become more physically active (Scott 1993). Representing sports as empowering to women, Nike constructed the female athlete as resolute, determined and committed (Goldman and Papson 1998). Yet, this view is received somewhat sceptically by many feminists. For example McDonald (2000, p.44) comments:

Thus, second-wave understandings of empowerment that sought to politicise race, class and gender differences are co-opted and muted through postfeminist self-help strategies.

By focusing on individual satisfaction, postfeminism more often than not stifles collective critique by putting the onus back on the individual consumer. It also bears more than a passing resemblance to the modernist perspective that has dominated in Western culture, that our fate is in our

own individual hands, and that if we do not flourish in this postmodernist, post-feminist world it is down to our own shortcomings and inability to embrace the choices available to us.

Similarly, postmodernism dilutes the issue of gender in social and political processes, as it typically emphasises a lifestyle project and 'hybrid consumption' for consumers generally, rather than suggesting that any one variable has priority over other variables in an individual's make-up. Hollows (2000) argues that the lifestyle project may be experienced as a complex and troubling one for women; indeed the concept of consumer liberation through multiple choices in the marketplace may merely be experienced as another form of disenfranchisement and confusion (Miller 1995).

Munshi (1998) in her study of the construction of the 'New Indian Woman' illustrates how the potentially threatening force of feminism becomes tamed once it is channelled through the ideologies of the marketplace and closely linked to consumerism. Remaining thus within the traditional structures of patriarchy it loses its disruptive potential. Curthoys (1997) goes so far as to accuse contemporary feminism of distorting the founding principles of the early feminist movement, which she distinguishes as being concerned with changing the world rather than interpreting it. In her view, a solidarity, akin to the Christian notion of love, has been displaced by postmodern theorising that is devoid of any moral content.

While taking on board the postmodern critique of universalising categories such as male and female and the postfeminist reconciliation with, and celebration of, consumer culture, many feminists argue that gender is still an important category. Although distinctions between male and female gender categories may now be more blurred, the male/female binary remains an important organising category in our society. Historically, feminists have always campaigned for the proper representation of women, an agenda that postmodernists challenge by questioning the very identity of womanhood itself (Lee 2001). Thus, whilst there are many points of agreement between postmodernists, postfeminists and the more traditional, and usually older, feminists, they disagree on the significance and relevance of maleness versus femaleness in people's everyday lives. To illustrate, when it comes to various quality of life indicators such as health, education and income, women are still disadvantaged in comparison to their male counterparts (Hill and Kanwalroop 1999). Similarly, most jobs are segregated on the basis of gender with female dominated occupations still attracting less status and money than those of males (Jarman et al. 1999). This is particularly relevant to marketers, given the increasing "feminisation" of the marketing profession (Maclaran and Catterall 2000).

In addition, the decline in political engagement among feminists right across the academy and beyond and not simply in marketing and consumer research is disturbing, because in the absence of such engagement, women are the key targets of neo-conservative social policies in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. This is especially the case amongst women on welfare or state benefits, usually lone parents. Even within the narrow confines of the academy, the recent upsurge of perspectives from evolutionary psychology on management (Nicholson 1998), women at work (Browne 1998), advertising (Earls 2003) and consumer behaviour (Saad and Gill 2000) has flourished without significant critical feminist work to counterbalance its assertions. Indeed it could be argued that evolutionary psychologists found sex/gender an easy target in their work in the absence of sustained critical feminist voices. Thus, Segal (2000) argues that the literary paradigms that dominate current feminist thinking have produced rich models for subjectivity and identity but there also needs to be engagement between feminist theory and feminist activism.

Moving Beyond the Impasse

In this final section we identify several neglected topics around the theme of production, reproduction and consumption that would benefit from a more critical feminist approach within consumer research. In this respect, one of the most interesting theoretical perspectives to attract attention in recent times is materialist feminism (Jackson 2001). Although this perspective is not new (see Delphy 1980), there has been a resurgence of interest in some of its basic tenets. Specifically, materialist feminists argue that the so-called 'cultural turn' embraced by postmodernists shifted feminism's emphasis from social structures and inequalities to issues of culture, language, representation and subjectivity (Jackson 2001). Materialist feminists see the social as incorporating both cultural aspects of life *and* social structures and systems. Gender, it is argued, is more than just a cultural distinction between men and women; it is sustained through hierarchical social structures that include divisions in labour.

Moreover, as consumer researchers we focus on gender and consumption, but in our efforts to understand this relationship in culture we too often ignore important interrelationships with production and reproduction. For example, McRobbie (1997) argues that the British fashion industry employs a majority of females in the production and manufacturing processes, females who are invariably low paid and frequently working within male-dominated structures. The consumption choices for these females are severely limited by their material circumstances. This contrasts sharply with research that focuses on consumption alone. Here the consumption of fashion is examined

for its potential in providing the consumer with opportunities to create and change identity and invariably the subjects of this research are more prosperous consumers.

Unlike their more prosperous counterparts, consumers on low incomes and state benefits do not have the luxury of constructing and reconstructing consumer identities at will. Indeed Philip Kotler might have invented the term demarketing especially for them given their lack of attractiveness to most marketers of goods and services. As Bauman (1998) pointed out, the poor, who are limited in their ability to respond to market temptations, have been marginalised from mainstream society and described as 'unwanted', 'abnormal', 'non-consumers', and 'flawed consumers'. Of course, consumers on low incomes are far from a minority group in society.

In Britain today some 9.5 million people cannot afford to heat their homes, 8 million are unable to purchase the most essential household goods and 10,000 die each year through poverty (Curtis 2000). It has also been long acknowledged that poor people pay more than their more prosperous counterparts to access even the most basic goods and services they need (Alwitt and Donley 1996). For example, supermarket prices are often higher in poor areas than in more prosperous ones. Poor consumers are also less able to switch to alternative suppliers because of existing debt burdens and they are unable to take advantage of any savings from direct debit (3.5 million do not have a bank account) (Curtis 2000). This is recognised as a policy issue, though perhaps not as high on the priority list for the Blair government as it was in the late 1990s, and marketers are being asked to demonstrate the measures they are taking to address disadvantaged consumers (Curtis 2000). Once again this highlights the need to study the relationship between consumption *and* production, the latter referring to marketing strategy and practices. It also links to gendered consumption and its interrelationship with reproduction and production.

Hill and Kanwalroop (1999) have drawn our attention to a lack of research on the gendered aspects of this consumer inequality: poor consumers tend to be female consumers and especially lone mothers. The feminisation of poverty and its interrelationship with consumption has not been well addressed within consumer research. This is a rich topic for feminist analyses in its own right, but especially now, given the current neo-conservative welfare policies in both Britain and the US. Lone mothers have been demonised in both countries. US welfare to work policies effectively mean that reproductive work (child bearing and childrearing) is no longer a basis for making claims (Boyer 2003). Whilst welfare to work policies have not been enforced with the same enthusiasm in the UK, the underpinning assumption in both countries is that reproductive work is not of value, and certainly not within certain forms of 'family' structure. The impact of such

assumptions on consumer identities, especially in relation to stigmatisation, has yet to be investigated, together with the impact on family dynamics more generally.

Feminist economists have long argued against the devaluation of reproductive work given that it sustains, or even makes possible, productive work outside the home. Sivard (1995), for example, suggests that at least a quarter of the value of the world's gross domestic product can be attributed to women's work inside the home. At the same time there is increasing overlap between the productive and reproductive economies, highlighting the difficulties of sustaining such rigid distinctions between them (Peterson 2002). For example, the separation of private and public spheres becomes less distinct with home working. The productive economy has become increasingly informalised (more like the reproductive economy). The huge rise in service industries has been accompanied by increasing casualisation of the service workforce and economic activity outside of regulation (Peterson 2002). Additionally proceeds from illegal activity, such as dealing in illicit drugs and prostitution, and unrecorded income, such as payments in cash, were estimated at a quarter of the world's gross domestic product in 1998 (Peterson 2002). There are new research opportunities here to investigate the impacts on consumption within the 'private' domestic sphere of this increased informalisation.

One of the main theoretical contributions of the feminist literature is that gender relations and stereotypes can be reinforced by both the production and the consumption of technology and that there is a mutual shaping relationship between gender and technology (Faulkner 2001). There can be strong divisions of labour around technology both in its production and consumption. Production in this case refers to the design, manufacture and marketing of technology and this interrelates with how technology is consumed to perpetuate, or perhaps to reshape, gender inequalities. Technological artefacts can become gendered by association. For example, few household technologies are used equally by males and females. Cockburn (1997) shows how unequal gender relations can shape the design and development of new technologies. Gendered assumptions about users can be designed into new technologies (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993). As might be expected, consumer researchers who have tended to focus primarily on gender and consumption have often overlooked the three-way relationship between production, consumption and gender. Whilst many research opportunities remain for consumer researchers to examine these relationships in relation to consumer technological artefacts and their production and marketing, marketers' use of technology and man-machine systems to engage in consumer surveillance and to control consumer behaviour remains an uncharted area for consumer researchers.

The services workforce tends to be more polarised with high earning management and professional workers and low paid, unskilled and non-unionised workers. The latter is also a largely feminised workforce. It is this workforce that is often at the front end of relationship marketing and CRM activities. These employees are often working with technology via sophisticated online man-machine systems to service customers from marketers' call centres, internet sites and retail spaces. A perusal of any of the many customer complaint websites that now populate the internet reveals the levels of frustration and anger amongst many of today's consumers and the associated levels of abuse suffered in turn by customer facing staff (<http://www.ixat.net>). Usually such issues are examined under the spotlight of service failure, with services marketers arguing for delegating more decision making powers to their front line staff (Stefan 2004), or from organisational behaviour perspectives (Sturdy, Grugulis and Willmott 2001). Similarly, at one time anger and aggressiveness amongst consumers would have been conceptualised as 'aberrant' consumer behaviour (Fullerton and Punj 1993), a topic that seems largely to have faded from research attention. However, there is potential to examine this production/consumption interface under a consumer research spotlight. For example, what assumptions about consumers and behaviours are designed into CRM man-machine systems?

Conclusion

During the 1990s feminist perspectives on consumer behaviour, especially in the arena of gender, performed an important critical role. However, as postmodernist writers challenged the modernist assumptions in feminist theories and postfeminists disengaged with feminist activism, critical feminist perspectives seemed to wane. Critique from a variety of critical perspectives is important for academics and practitioners alike in that it offers a space where the basic assumptions, theories and practices in marketing and consumer research can be challenged. It can also lead to a rethinking of key issues and reframing the debates in which theory and practice development takes place. Whilst we do not propose a return to the early 1970s feminist anti-marketing and anti-consumerism critique, feminist critique still has much to offer us, especially in relation to marketers' assumptions regarding marginalised consumers and in demonstrating that the current focus on consumption as liberation and an identity project neglects important structural interrelationships with production and reproduction.

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